Research Notes: Susanna (possibly) McMeel Laughlin

Research Overview:

Susanna McElmeel is not elusive because the evidence is thin. She is elusive because the evidence is abundant, directional, and non-convergent.

Beginning in the early 1840s, census and local records identify Susanna as the Irish-born wife of Arthur Laughlin, living consistently in Hopkinton and South Fork, Delaware County, Iowa. Across multiple enumerations and the births of several children, she is securely present in place and role as wife and mother. The identity of her children is well established through census continuity and descendant DNA, leaving no doubt that the correct family unit has been identified.

At the same time, no surviving document names Susanna's parents, records her marriage, or securely establishes her maiden name. There is no clear trail leading to her arrival in Iowa and no contemporaneous record that connects her to a known family group before her appearance there. She enters the documentary record not gradually, but abruptly—fully adult, married, and settled—without a documented origin.

The central challenge of Susanna's research is therefore not the absence of evidence, but its refusal to align. Multiple independent lines of inquiry point toward connection, kinship, and place, yet none converge at the level required to identify her birth family. This research reflects the current state of that problem: a case that appears solvable through reconstruction-based methods, but which has not yet yielded to them.

Speculative Narrative:

Time Line

c. 1810 - Based on census reporting, Susanna was born in Ireland, likely around 1810. Her specific place of birth has not been identified. While no document names a county or parish, genetic evidence consistently points to County Monaghan, with multiple DNA matches bearing the McMeel and McElmeel surnames clustering in the civil parish of Tedavnet, including the townland of Knocknagrave. This concentration suggests that Susanna

originated within the Tedavnet area under a variant of the McMeel/McElmeel surname. At present, this remains a working hypothesis.

Records do exist for County Monaghan and for Tedavnet parish, but they are limited in both scope and chronology. Catholic baptismal registers for Tedavnet generally begin in the early to mid-1820s, with marriage records often starting later, placing a woman born around 1810 outside reliable parish coverage. Earlier Church of Ireland records survive, but would apply if the family were Anglican, which later evidence makes unlikely. Civil registration begins too late to be useful, and land and tax records such as the Tithe Applotment Books and Griffith's Valuation can document the presence of McMeel and McElmeel families, but cannot identify Susanna within them. As a result, the existing records define the limits of what can currently be proven rather than resolving her place of birth.[1]

About 1840 - Marriage to Arthur Laughlin (1804 - 1874) at an unknown place. Possibly Ireland or Pennsylvania.[2]

24 Nov 1841 - Birth of son James C Laughlin (1841 -1908) at Hopkinton, Delaware, Iowa.[3]

James's birth is the first documented event placing Arthur and Susanna in Iowa and falls immediately after the period when they would have married and migrated.

In his Civil War papers, James stated that he was "almost born in Pennsylvania," a brief remark that points to Pennsylvania immediately before the family arrived in Iowa. This detail stands out because Owen McElmeel was living in Pennsylvania during the same period and later settled in the same small farming community in Iowa. Records examined so far for Owen's time in Pennsylvania do not reference Arthur Laughlin or Susanna McElmeel, nor has a marriage record been identified there.

Pennsylvania remains a plausible but unconfirmed link between Susanna's Irish origins and her first documented appearance in Iowa.

[1] Baptism record for Susanna McMeel

[2] Marriage record for Susanna McMeel and Arthur Laughlin

[3] Birth of son James C Laughlin

Relevant historical backdrop: Irish Catholic migration from Philadelphia to Iowa

Irish Catholic migration from Philadelphia to eastern Iowa in the early 1840s provides a historical backdrop that coincides closely with the period immediately preceding Arthur and Susanna's first documented appearance in Iowa. In 1843, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary relocated from Philadelphia to Dubuque, Iowa, after having served Irish immigrant communities in Philadelphia's Kensington area from 1833 to 1843.

This movement occurred during the same years when Arthur and Susanna may have been in Pennsylvania, shortly before the birth of their first child in Iowa. Dubuque County is next to Delaware County, where the family later settled.

St. Augustine's Church in Philadelphia was a major center of Irish Catholic life during the late 1830s, with roughly half of its parishioners reported as Irish-born by 1838. Although the original church was destroyed during the 1844 Nativist riots, earlier sacramental records may survive and remain relevant to the search for an Irish Catholic marriage during this period.

This describes the conditions under which such a migration could have occurred. No evidence has yet been identified that places Arthur or Susanna within this network.

6 Feb 1844 - Birth of daughter Anna R Laughlin (1844 - 1907) at Cascade, Delaware, Iowa.[4]

1846 - Birth of son William Laughlin (1846 -) at Iowa.[5]

May 1850 - Birth of son John Arthur Laughlin at Hopkinton, Delaware, Iowa.[6]

1850 - US Census at Delaware, Iowa.[7]

[4] Birth of daughter Anna R Laughlin

[5] Birth of son William Laughlin

[6] Birth of son John Arthur Laughlin

[7] "United States Census, 1850", , *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MZ4D-46P: Fri Mar 08 07:02:14 UTC 2024), Entry for Arthur Laughlin and Susan Laughlin, 1850.

Arthur Langhlin, 45

Jason Danghlin, 40

Jame Langhlin, 4

Ann Langhlin, 7

Wm Langhlin, 4

1854 - Birth of son Henry Laughlin (1854 - 1907) at South Fork, Delaware, Iowa.[8]

1856 - Iowa State Census at South Fork, Delaware, Iowa.[9]

Arthur Lauflin, 52

Susanna Lauflin, 45

James Lauflin, 14

Ann Lauflin, 12

Wm Lauflin, 10

John Lauflin, 4

Henry Lauflin, 2

Henry Laughlin, 5

1860 - US Census at Hopkinton, Delaware, Iowa.[10]

[8] Birth of son Henry Laughlin

[9] 1856 - Iowa State Census

[10] "United States Census, 1860", , *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M82J-1M1: Mon Jul 08 06:59:22 UTC 2024), Entry for Ann Miller and John Miller, 1860.

Arthur Laughlin, 55

Susan Laughlin, 50

James Laughlin, 18

Ann Laughlin, 16

William Laughlin, 15

John Laughlin, 10

Henry Laughlin, 5

1870 - US Census at South Fork, Delaware, Iowa.[11]

Arthur Laughlin, 66

Susan Laughlin, 66

John Laughlin, 16

Henry Laughlin, 15

Henry Laughlin, 5

Ida Loomis, 16

27 Feb 1874- Death of husband Arthur Laughlin (1804 - 1874) at South Fork, Delaware, Iowa.[12]

1874–1889 — Burial context and kin proximity

Arthur Laughlin was buried in a small cemetery in Delhi, Iowa, among twenty-six McElmeel graves and five McMeel graves, placing him unmistakably within a cluster dominated by those families. In a rural community where burial placement typically reflected kinship and long-standing association, this concentration demands explanation.

Despite extensive research into the McElmeel and McMeel households represented in that cemetery, no documentary link has yet been established

[11] "United States Census, 1870", , *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MDJB-8KV: Tue Mar 05 07:15:59 UTC 2024), Entry for Arthur Laughlin and Susan Laughlin, 1870.

[12] Death of husband Arthur Laugh**lin**

between Susanna and those families. No shared migration path, land record, church record, or probate reference has been identified to explain the proximity. The cemetery suggests relationship; the records refuse to confirm it.

1880 - US Census at Delaware, Iowa.[13]

James Beacom - white, male, age 46, farmer, born Ireland, parents born Ireland

Anne Beacom - white, female, age 36, wife, keeping house, born Iowa, parents born Ireland

William H Beacom - white, male, age 16, son, at house, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

John Beacom - white, male, age 15, son, at house, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

Thomas Beacom - white male, 13, son, at house, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

Ann Beacom - white, female, age 12, daughter, at school, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

Susan Beacom - white female, age 11, daughter, at school, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

James A Beacom - white, male, age 8, son, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

George Beacom- white male, age 6, son, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

Kate Beacom - white, female, age 0, daughter, born Iowa, father born Ireland, mother born Iowa

Susan Laughlin - white female, age 78, born Ireland, parents born in Ireland

[13] "United States Census, 1880", , *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MDL4-PWQ: Mon Jul 15 09:00:34 UTC 2024), Entry for James Beacons and Ann Beacons, 1880.

1880 at Delhi, Iowa - Owen McElmeel (born 1805 in County Monaghan) died in 1880 in Delhi, Iowa**,** and is buried in the same cemetery area as Arthur Laughlin. He was an Irish Catholic immigrant from County Monaghan who shared the McElmeel surname and later resided in the same Iowa community. While DNA connections exist within the broader McElmeel network, the marriage of Owen's son James to Catherine Devine complicates attribution, and no documentary or genetic evidence currently establishes a familial relationship between Owen and Susanna.

26 Sep 1889 - Death at Sheldon, O'Brien, Iowa**.** [14]

Mrs. Laughlin, mother of Mrs. James Beacom, who resides northeast of town, died the latter part of last week at the ripe age of 90 years, and was buried in the Catholic cemetery on Sunday."

Oct 3, 1889

Sheldon Mail

Sep - Burial at St Patrick's Cemetery at Sheldon, Delaware, Iowa[15] near the grave of her daughter, Anna Laughlin Beacom.

Genetic Evidence:

Genetic evidence narrows Susanna's possible origins without resolving them. While no document names a specific county or parish, DNA matches consistently point to Ulster, with recurring signals in County Monaghan and adjacent border regions of South Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as well as Southeast Ulster and Northeast Leinster. These results, drawn from the oldest tested Laughlin descendant whose Irish ancestry derives entirely from her maternal line and supported by an additional Laughlin descendant tested on the same platform, identify specific areas where further record-based research may be productive.

[14] Death record for Susanna Laughlin

[15] "Find a Grave Index," database, *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QVV8-ZL3F : 15 December 2020), Susan McMeel Laughlin, ; Burial, Sheldon, O'Brien, Iowa, United States of America, Saint Patricks Cemetery; citing record ID 10802503, *Find a Grave*, http://www.findagrave.com.

The concentration of DNA matches is sharpened by surname specificity. The McElmeel surname is geographically limited to the County Monaghan–Tyrone border region and does not appear elsewhere in Ireland, while McMeel represents a recognized variant of the same name. DNA matches bearing these surnames recur within the same border area identified by ethnicity and match data, strengthening the case for a shared regional origin. Yet despite this convergence of surname and place, DNA evidence has not identified Susanna within a specific household or parent group. The pattern suggests kinship, but it does not define the relationship.

DNA evidence becomes more resistant rather than more decisive when individual relationships are examined. A strong genetic connection appears to be to Catherine McElmeel, who emigrated to Australia, suggesting a close familial tie that could represent a sibling or first-cousin relationship. Yet no documentary evidence has yet been identified that links Catherine to Susanna, nor has any record been found that explains why one woman remained with family who emigrated to Australia while the other appears independently as a farmer's wife in rural Iowa. In addition, one couple—James McKenna and Sarah McElmeel—consistently appears in the family trees of multiple DNA matches, but their connection to Arthur Laughlin or to Susanna McElmeel remains unestablished. Confirmed DNA matches also intersect with the family of James McElmeel, son of Owen McElmeel; however, James's marriage to Catherine Devine introduces a parallel Devine line that confounds attribution. What appears at first to be a narrowing circle instead reveals overlapping lines that obscure rather than clarify identity.